



April 17, 2025

The Honorable Doug Collins
Secretary
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Urgent Action Required to Protect US Veterans' Quality of Care and Confidentiality in Mental Health Treatment

Dear Secretary Collins,

Thank you for all you do to safeguard the health and welfare of our heroes, the Veterans of the United States Armed Forces. I'm writing to you with an urgent concern related to the recent order for VA staff to cease remote work and telework, and the corresponding exemption being considered for mental health therapists.

The International Federation of Eating Disorder Dietitians represents nearly 1000 registered dietitians throughout the country, many of whom proudly work within the VA system.

They have expressed their ethical concerns about leaving remote and telework situations where they can protect the confidentiality of their Veteran patients and moving into shared offices and communal workspaces where they cannot. They have reported situations where other patients, providers and staff are present in the same room, where patients have declined to share crucial information out of fear that others will hear, and one instance where a dietitian heard a patient speaking about her to his therapist – the colleague with whom she currently shares an office.

I know you understand the importance of confidentiality in mental health care, hence the consideration of an exemption for mental health therapists. But dietitians are also mental health care providers and have not been mentioned for a potential exemption. As you know, servicemembers and Veterans are at particularly high risk for eating disorders, and dietitians often lead their treatment because of both the crucial role of nutrition in eating disorder recovery, and our specific knowledge and training in both medical and mental health.

I'm asking that you please amend the exemption to include VA dietitians. That way those dietitians who cannot protect Veteran confidentiality in shared office spaces will be able to do so via remote work or telework.



Please consider this letter both a formal request and a formal record of concern. Personally and professionally I appreciate all you do to care for our Veterans, and as a licensed professional, I'm required to attempt to resolve unsafe and unethical practices when reported. The current predicament of VA dietitians is preventing them from their legal and ethical responsibilities to ensure that patients are treated in environments that safeguard their dignity, privacy, and safety, comply with HIPAA, and facilitate recovery and quality of life. I'm hopeful that bringing this situation to your attention will lead to your speedy correction of the situation.

At the same time, I'm aware the role of dietitians in healthcare is not always well-understood if you haven't personally experienced our work. So I'm happy to answer any questions as to why access to privacy is necessary for nutrition counseling, especially for Veterans with or at risk of eating disorders. You can reach me at 214-674-6455 or Jessica@JessicaSetnick.com at your convenience.

Sincerely,

Jessica Setnick, MS, RD, CEDS-C

Registered Dietitian, Certified Eating Disorder Specialist

Director, The International Federation of Eating Disorder Dietitians